

For You Are With Me

Psalm 23

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First Central Congregational UCC
13 September 2015

Today we arrive in our sermon series on the Psalms at Psalm 23. Of this psalm Walter Brueggemann writes, “It is almost pretentious to comment on this psalm. The grip it has on biblical spirituality is deep and genuine. It is such a simple statement that it can bear its own witness without comment.”

From the *Feasting on the Word* series, in his advice for how to preach this passage, pastor David Burns writes, “One way to approach preaching Psalm 23 is not to preach it. Just read it slowly—preferably in the King James Version—and then sit down.”

Tempting, but I’m not going to do quite that.

Instead, I’m going to follow some advice I read some years ago and offer this most familiar of biblical passages in multiple translations with the help of Fred Nielsen. I’ll do so with a few comments and questions. But as you listen to these words, especially unfamiliar versions, listen for the unfamiliar, listen for what stands out to you. Let this psalm speak a new word to you today.

Hear now, first from the King James Version, the 23rd Psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me:
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

More than one commentary I read noted that the term “shepherd” was used in the ancient world to refer to the ruler and the ruler’s responsibility to care for the people. Clinton McCann wrote, “it would never occur to the huge majority of North American Christians to hear Psalm 23 as a ‘political tract’ that ‘condemns . . . forces of tyranny.’” McCann is referencing the church historian Philip Jenkins who points out that this political reading is precisely how most African and Asian Christians read the text—“For Africans and Asians the psalm offers a stark

rebuttal to claims by unjust states that they care lovingly for their subjects.”

FRED: From *Kol Haneshama: Prayers for a House of Mourning*, a Jewish translation of the Psalm.

The Eternal is my shepherd; I shall never be in need.
Amid the choicest grasses does God set me down.
God leads me by the calmest waters,
and restores my soul.
God takes me along paths of righteousness,
in keeping with the honor of God’s name.
Even should I wander in a valley of the darkest shadows,
I will fear no evil,
You are with me, God. Your power and support
are there to comfort me.
You set in front of me a table
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup is overflowing.
Surely, good and loving-kindness will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I shall come to dwell inside the house
of The Eternal for a length of days.

David M. Burns writes, “Psalm 23 is so often used in funerals because, in the moment when we reach for our best and truest words about the sum of life, we go here. . . . The one giving testimony in Psalm 23 says that to belong to God in life and in death, today and tomorrow, is a good thing indeed.”

From the New Revised Standard Version:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Walter Brueggemann writes "It is likely that the psalm is not idyllic and romantic as is often interpreted; rather, the psalmist speaks out of a context of deep danger and articulates confidence in YHWH as the one who will keep the flock safe and protected in the face of every danger."

FRED: Robert Alter's translation:

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
In grass meadows He makes me lie down,
by quiet waters guides me.
My life He brings back.
He leads me on pathways of justice
for His name's sake.
Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow,
I fear no harm,
for You are with me.
Your rod and Your staff--
it is they that console me.
You set out a table before me
in the face of my foes.
You moisten my head with oil,
my cup overflows.

David M. Burns writes, "[Psalm 23] invites us to pause and find our own language for confessing what we have come to believe about life under God's care. . . What language would you use to speak of God's provision in your life?"

FRED: By Phyllis Bass Psalm 23: A Feminist Version

The Schechinah, a sheltering presence, makes me whole as a woman:
Causing me to rest in green fields, Leading me to calming waters, Replenishing my soul,
And empowering me to make life affirming choices In celebration of God's name.
Even though I have walked in darkness and known loss, I have not despaired for you are
with me.
Your guidance and your nurturing spirit have sustained me.
You have set a full table for me when I have been hurt and alienated.
You have conferred upon me unique potential, which I strive to realize.

From the deep core of my being I am overflowing with gratitude.
I know that your goodness and loving kindness will continue to abide within me,
And I will live out my days in God's house.

The Psalm reminds us, as Brueggemann writes, that "life with Yahweh is a life of well-being and satisfaction."

From The Message by Eugene Peterson:

GOD, my shepherd!
I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.
Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.
You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.
Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of GOD
for the rest of my life.

"Beauty and love chase after me?" Yes, the goodness and mercy that follow us are pursuing us. The New Cambridge Bible Commentary says "The subject [of the poem] experiences luxurious extravagance in a context of threat, danger, and death."

FRED: From the New English Bible:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall want nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
and leads me beside the waters of peace;
he renews life within me,
and for his name's sake guides me in the right path.
Even though I walk through a valley dark as death
I fear no evil, for thou art with me,

thy staff and thy crook are my comfort.
Thou spreadest a table for me in the sight of my enemies;
thou hast richly bathed my head with oil,
and my cup runs over.
Goodness and love unfailing, these will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

More than one commentator pointed out that in the poem the shepherd image is replaced by the image of God as host. The emphasis is upon God's hospitality. David Burns asks "Where has God led you to find rest, refreshment, and restoration?"

From the Contemporary English Version:

You, LORD, are my shepherd.
I will never be in need.
You let me rest in fields
of green grass.
You lead me to streams
of peaceful water,
and you refresh my life.
You are true to your name,
and you lead me
along the right paths.
I may walk through valleys
as dark as death,
but I won't be afraid.
You are with me,
and your shepherd's rod
makes me feel safe.
You treat me to a feast,
while my enemies watch.
You honor me as your guest,
and you fill my cup
until it overflows.
Your kindness and love
will always be with me
each day of my life,
and I will live forever
in your house, LORD.

We arrive at this place of abundant hospitality after a difficult journey through dark and dangerous places. Walter Brueggemann writes, "It is God's companionship that transforms

every situation. It does not mean there are no deathly valleys, no enemies. But they are not capable of hurt, and so the powerful loyalty and solidarity of Yahweh comfort, precisely in situations of threat.”

FRED: By Rabbi Brant Rosen

The Holy one is my Guide;
my life is whole.
We journey together
over fertile hillsides
and rest
beside nourishing springs.
This is my spirit
ever renewed,
for my Guide leads me
down paths of fullness.
Even when my steps lead
into the kingdom of death
I do not fear
for I know you are with me.
Your presence
your shelter
is a comfort to me.
With you I can set myself aright
in the face of
deepest sorrow;
and soon my joy is filled to overflowing.
As I journey on,
nothing but kindness and love
shall follow
until the day I finally return.
To my Source,
my destination.

So, finally, this is a psalm of confidence that God, You are always with us, and that no matter what happens in our lives, in times of darkness, in times of joy, you are there, walking with us, leading us forward, protecting and caring for us, and then welcoming us home with abundance.

From the TANAKH

The LORD is my shepherd;
I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me to water in places of repose;
He renews my life;
He guides me in right paths
as befits His name.
Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness
I fear no harm, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.
You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
my drink is abundant.
Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
for many long years.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.